Teaching Freedom? Postmodern Perspectives

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Postmodern theory is often seen as a realm either of totally free play—where anything goes and there are no rules at all—or of despair where all visions of equality and democracy are equated with totalitarianism. Coherent ways of talking about "actors" or "responsibility" can appear to be entirely repudiated. Further perceived as elitist, obscure, convoluted, and entirely removed from any kind of practical reality, postmodernism is often viewed as having nothing relevant to say to teachers or those interested in concretely improving education. This paper attempts to show that these visions are not entirely fair to the ways many "postmodern" theorists strive to explore carefully the myriad tensions invariably involved in politics and pedagogy or to the (perhaps surprising) egalitarian commitments that generally undergird their projects. Taking advantage of the fluid and ultimately undefinable character of the idea of the "postmodern," this paper draws from an eclectic group of thinkers, teasing out a range of different perspectives that might inform, complicate, and contest efforts to "teach freedom."

> When we discover in this world no earth or rock to stand or walk upon but only shifting sea and sky and wind, the mature response is not to lament the loss of fixity but to learn to sail.
> —*James Boyd White* (cited in Reinhardt, 1997, p. 1)

It would be impossible for any one paper to encompass, even in the most tentative way, the enormous diversity of "postmodern" thought. A great deal of important work, for example, examines the cultural, social, and economic shifts of our current historical moment, exploring what is sometimes called the "new capitalism," the effects of new communications technology, the construction of new kinds of consumer cultures, and more.[1] While I touch on these issues, and while they provide the background for my discussions, however, I focus in this paper on a more "abstract" level, examining the possibilities and limitations of the kinds of theoretical frameworks that have increasingly been developed in parallel and in response to these developments. Often this "theoretical" side of postmodernism is termed "poststructural," after pathbreaking French theorists like Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida. But while I include their work in my discussion, because I draw from a wider and more eclectic group of thinkers, the broader term, "postmodern," seems more appropriate.

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Most educators would like to believe their teaching has something to do with freedom. They hope their efforts will liberate their students, somehow empowering them and their communities to change our society for the better, and many educational theorists have attempted to explain how education might promote such goals. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, for example, Paulo Freire (1970) argues that the right forms of education can teach students "to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality," by helping them overcome their false understandings of the world, and providing them with tools to remake it into a better place (p. 17). Other theorists, such as Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Jürgen Habermas have been read as arguing that there are natural and universal, or at least definably better and worse, directions for human development that better forms of education can promote (see Habermas, 1990).

With the emergence of what is often called "postmodern" theory, however, we have entered what Judith Butler (1997) calls a "postliberatory" era. Postmodern theorists can no longer make coherent sense of the old idea that there might be some pre-cultural, "authentic" self that could be released from oppression into freedom. Nor do postmodern theorists believe in universal theories of *progress*. Things change, but it is difficult to know what "better" or "worse" might mean for any individual or community at any particular time, in any context.

Underlying these rejections of (simple versions of) liberation and progress is a repudiation of the idea that, at least in the social sciences (and sometimes in the natural sciences as well) there can be any *absolute* foundation for knowledge. Thus, for writers like Michel Foucault (1977; 1979), constructing knowledge *about* people or communities is also a way of generating *power over* them. In the context of education, for example, postmodernists tend to argue that what we are led to believe about ourselves, what we learn about how we are supposed to act, the ways we are taught to frame "problems," and even the tools of reason that we use to solve these problems, do not simply represent neutral skills but are in fact ways of forming us into particular kinds of subjects. "Power" in this vision does not merely suppress or restrict, but actually produces actions and desires. Thus, in the hands of postmodern thinkers, practices of teaching that might seem initially progressive, such as collaborative learning, expressive writing, dialogue groups, and more, are often shown to be deeply enmeshed in systems of power.

It should be no surprise, then, that postmodern thought has not gotten a very enthusiastic reception in many educational circles, especially among teachers. Postmodern visions of education can, at least on the surface, seem to imply that all teachers are always and everywhere promoting domination in their efforts to teach students to be different than who they are. Unless there is a sense of how some kind of "freedom" or "agency" can be promoted from within a "postmodern" perspective, I am convinced that postmodern theory will remain largely irrelevant to those with whom it would most like to communicate. At the same time, however, it is important from the beginning to acknowledge the limits of the kinds of theory discussed here, to examine some of the problems and conundrums involved in somehow "applying" theory to practice.

Like more recent scholars like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), John Dewey (1916) points out that theory does not arise immaculately out of some kind of pure thought. Instead, theory is invariably drawn from experience. Theories are abstract generalizations that seek to free themselves from particular situations or contexts, "from all which is purely personal and strictly immediate" (p. 226). Furthermore, theories do not reside unproblematically within the particulars of lived lives. Instead, all theories must be generated by specific individuals and groups; human intervention and creativity of some kind is required to *make* coherent sense of contingent situations. Thus, feminist theorists especially (e.g., Haraway 1988; Collins, 1989; Pateman, 1989) have consistently shown how apparently neutral social theories actually reflect the perspectives of particular groups. As Sandra Harding (1991) notes, "all thought by humans starts off from socially determinate lives" and knowledge claims cannot avoid bearing "the fingerprints of the communities that produce them" (p. 57).

The theories I discuss in this paper are no exception. Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1996), for example, argue that "communitarian" theories like that of Alasdair MacIntyre reflect essentially working-class visions of community. Audrey Thompson (1997) shows that Nel Noddings' "caring" arises from white, middle-class experiences, and I argue elsewhere (Schutz, 1999) that Hannah Arendt's "public" reflects at least middle-class, professional ways of being in the world. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1996) asserts that Laclau and Mouffe's model of radical democracy is "appropriate only to liberal democracies and/or postindustrial societies of the North Atlantic model" (p. 142). In fact, postmodern theory is often accused of being largely white and Western, among other criticisms. While the relative accuracy of these critiques depends upon what facet of postmodernism one is speaking of, these two aspects are largely reflective of the thinkers I discuss here. The perspectives I examine, then, in many different ways, represent only a narrow sliver of those one might include as postmodern, and this is an important limitation of this article.[2]

The relationships between particular theories and the worldviews, desires, and interests of particular groups and times are never simple nor direct, however. As Jacques Derrida (1988) argues, it is never possible to definitively identify a clear point of origin for a theory. One cannot, for example, avoid drawing upon old theories in efforts to construct "new" ones; new theory, then, is always in some sense derivative of the old. Further, because theories are always, by definition, partially detached from particular contexts because of their necessary abstraction, there can be no absolute rules governing their application to new situations, no way to know for sure what they will *mean* in new contexts. The application of theoretical "knowledge" involves an unpredictable and creative process. While theories invariably bear the "fingerprints" of particular groups and moments, then, these fingerprints are always multiple, overlapped, and conflicted.

Theoretical generalizations are always caught between past and future. They are always already obsolete. One can never know ahead of time, for certain, whether or how a particular theory will prove relevant in a given situation. In fact, as I note below, Thomas Popkewitz shows that there is always the danger that the inequalities/workings of power in a particular historical moment will influence how a theory will operate, however egalitarian it might seem on the surface. Theory must always, therefore, be handled gingerly and with suspicion.

I am increasingly convinced, however, that some of the dangers of theory might be mitigated by having access to a range of different, often contradictory theoretical frameworks. In fact, on the most practical level Charles Euchner (1996) argues that efforts to promote social action that embody only single visions of political action are doomed to ultimate failure in an always changing and multifaceted world. It is in this spirit of plurality that I have written this review.[3] For example, you will find no consistent idea of "freedom" in this paper. Instead, the term serves as a kind of shifting signifier, taking on an often fundamentally different meaning in the different perspectives it finds itself. While Arendt argues that individuals achieve freedom only thorough participation with others on shared projects, for example, Richard Rorty asserts, on the contrary, that freedom can only be achieved through isolated artistic activity. Thus, I seek, here, not to promote a single vision of freedom, but instead to explore the myriad and often contradictory possibilities of this idea in the realm of the postmodern. Again, however, the perspectives represented here are only a small sample of those one could call "postmodern."

Before I begin, however, it is important to note that writing a paper "about" postmodernism is an extremely problematic undertaking. Postmodern writing generally seeks to complicate the idea of simple unities and identities. To speak of "postmodernism" as if it were a definable concept or movement, then, risks doing violence both to the very idea of postmodernism (even though "it" doesn't exist) and to the multiplicity of definitions of "the postmodern" both between, within, and through interpretations of the works of different theorists. Nonetheless, I use the term constantly here. Without it, a paper about postmodern theory could not be written: Without the glue of this imaginary concept, the center could not hold, the essay would break apart into a thousand fragments, losing any pretense of coherence (a very postmodern result, but one not very conducive to my central aims). My use of "postmodernism," then, is a first example of what, in the next section, I call a "strategy." It is a strategy because I *know* I am talking about something that can't really be talked about. I do it because I have no choice, and I accept the problems and dilemmas such use brings with it, even though I cannot anticipate all of them. At the same time I have used the opportunity created by the fluid nature of this term to construct my own conflicted vision not only of what postmodernism "is," but of what aspects of it could be.

Strategy and Clarity

Spivak (1993), a prominent proponent of strategies argues that "a strategy" is something that "suits a situation" (p. 4). Strategies are thoroughly situated and contextualized; they are employed for particular purposes in particular contexts at particular times. The concept of "strategy" is so useful in postmodernism because to engage in a strategy is to acknowledge one's own limitations, the necessarily problematic and uncertain character of any action.

The perspectives I present here can be seen as strategies for thinking, constituting different lenses through which one might examine an activity like teaching, while at the same time problematizing the very idea of teaching itself. One can think of the perspectives discussed here as strategic because, unlike more traditional visions of theory, they do not aim at any kind of transcendental truth or universal validity. They provide not answers about the world, but instead

facilitate the asking of different kinds of questions, illuminating aspects of the world and potentially opening possibilities for action that one may not have noticed or considered without them. They become strategies for action, actual practices of teaching, for example, only when they are creatively and always unpredictably appropriated into actual contexts.

One of the best examples of the way postmodern theoretical perspectives can be transformed into practical strategies can be seen in the very stylistics of much postmodern writing, something that critics of postmodern theory often complain about (see, e.g., Nussbaum, 1999; Apple, 1995). "Postmodern" theorists like Henry Giroux (1992) and Patti Lather (1996) argue that the difficult and often obscure stylistic approach of many, though not all, postmodernists is not accidental, nor generally a result of laziness, but instead can represent a crucial aspect of many postmodern political projects. Giroux (1992) notes that critics of postmodernism who promote a "politics of clarity," tend to "privilege language according to the degree that it is accessible to a general public and roughly corresponds to an objectively verifiable reality" (p. 220). Giroux argues, however, that there are no neutral and universal standards for clarity and objectivity, and he is convinced that all efforts to arrive at such standards suppress "questions of context . . . situating language outside of history, power, and struggle" (p. 223). The convoluted rhetoric of much postmodern writing, Giroux argues, often represents an attempt to acknowledge these issues of struggle and power by resisting simple answers or definable categories and pressing, instead— through its very form—for an acknowledgment of the fluid undecidability, contingency, and contradiction inherent in (post)modern life. Instead of attempting to directly and unproblematically *describe* the world the way it *is*, the writing practices of postmodern writers tend to foreground the ways in which their texts aim at intervening in and *changing* the world, creating "new spaces, practices, and values" (p. 221). Their various approaches to writing, then, often represent in themselves practical efforts to promote, and through modeling to "teach," a practice of freedom to readers.

Of course, from a postmodern perspective, things are never quite so simple. A slightly belligerent response like Giroux's does not eliminate the possibility (the probability, actually) that he and other writers are sometimes, maybe often, hard to understand simply because they are not writing very carefully. Spivak (1994) worries, for example, that the belief that a writer like Derrida does not write thoughtfully has ended up producing increasingly careless pomo texts in which Derrida's readers "imitate the snazz without working on the intimidatingly precise" yet paradoxically also *open* "argument" (p. 39). We simply can't know *for sure* whether someone was careful or not. As Spivak, after Derrida, argues, we are left with the postmodern responsibility (yes, there is such a thing) of reading with respect, with attentiveness for the "trace" of the other person in the text. (And this is true only of pomo texts, but of *all* texts; from a postmodern perspective, "clarity" is always somewhat illusory.) To be postmodern, here, is to have some faith in the "other" who presents herself to you, however tenuously, through a particular text, even if, in the end, we may have to judge that text (or person).

Lather's (1996) work provides illuminating examples of efforts to use often disconcerting writing as a political tool. She worries that "to speak so as to be

understood immediately is to speak through the production of the transparent signifier" in a way that "maps easily onto taken-for-granted regimes of meaning" instead of working to challenge and resist these regimes (p. 528). Instead, she aims to "evoke in readers a complicity toward troubling the taken-for-granted" (p. 531). Lather thus actively resist telling a simple "truth" to readers, painstakingly constructing essays that seek to engage with others without, at the same time, maneuvering them into simplistic or static ways of seeing and interacting with the world.

In fact, Lather pursues multiple strategies for nurturing the openness of her writing. She notes in response to a review of her first book, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/In the Postmodern*, for example, that

> to be heard in the halls of High Theory, one must speak in the language of those who live there. . . . Believing strongly that we all can't do everything and that the struggle demands contestation on every front, I think my answer to [the reviewer's]...question ['how do we do the most good as feminists?'] seems to be, for me, at the time of [*Getting Smart*], Dada practice at the site of academic high theory. (p. 526)

To engage with this particular milieu, Lather chooses at this point to use a discursive strategy that the priests of High Theory might hear. She does not "deny . . . the mystifying effects of academic language" (p. 528) like her own, the danger that others outside the priesthood who do not speak the discourse of High Theory and who do not have the luxury of an academic lifestyle will not be able to understand her work.

Her next book, *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS*, written with Chris Smithies, is, in contrast, an attempt "to write a multivoiced text that speaks in different registers to a broad public audience" (p. 525), to write what one of the women in the book called a "Wal-Mart book." Yet the writing in *Troubling the Angels* still does not attempt the kind of "clarity" that critics of postmodernism have demanded. Instead of attempting to tell readers the simple "truth" about the women in the book, the writing again attempts to "evoke in readers a complicity toward troubling the taken-for-granted" (p. 531). It is a response to those in the academy who, as one of Lather's students noted, have "shortchanged the capabilities of everyday people to be able to grasp the complexities of how dichotomous the world we live in is" (p. 531). Such a writing aims at "broad appeal" and yet also points to its own limitations, seeking to elicit unpredictable readings in order to foster agency among its broad audience. Through a number of different techniques, including multiple frames and "registers" of text on the same page, Lather and Smithies develop a text that aims at "putting the authority of its own affirmations in doubt, an undercutting that causes a doubling of meanings that adds to a sense of multivalence and fluidities." (p. 533).

Commenting on Lather's writing strategy in *Troubling the Angels*, Haithe Anderson (1997) argues, in part, that "there is no tragedy in Lather's work, no sacrifices are required; she is making room for everyone and especially for herself" (p. 589). My sense, however, is that Lather (1996) is in fact conscious of the deep tragedy inherent in her writing choices. Her essay about writing *Troubling the Angels* seems at least partially to be an effort to struggle with the pain involved in choosing how the book will be written. I read her as grappling with

her and Smithies's decision not to tell a "realist tale," even though such an approach would

> tell the stories that the women want to tell, and would not risk displacing their bodies and their stories with High Theory, what a University of British Columbia student termed the 'akademic krime' of eliding material contexts, a kind of soma, vanity research that loses the women's stories. (p. 534)

"How," Lather wonders a few pages later,

> do Chris and I as translators of the women's stories betray the message with which we have been entrusted? What is the effect of our both getting in and out of the way in our desire to address what it is that we have come to this project to understand and what it means to know more than we are able to know, and to write toward what we don't understand?

She answers herself: "in the space between feminist commitment and textual innovation, the negotiation of such questions determines what stories can be told," and, I would add, the stories that cannot be told (p. 538).

The loss of the "realist tales" of these women's stories in an effort to produce such a postmodern agency on the part of readers is, I would contend, a terrible tragedy. "Here we all get lost," Lather acknowledges, "the women, the research-ers, the readers, the angels, precipitating an 'onto-epistemological panic' . . . aimed at opening up present frames of knowing to the possibilities of thinking differently" (p. 539). The strategy of writing embodied in the book gives up much in order (they hope) to accomplish much. It consciously accepts what I will argue is central to the postmodern challenge, the incredibly problematic and partial nature of any actions taken in its name. Citing Spivak, then, Lather can only argue for a "negotiation with enabling violence" that "[does not] pretend that what gives light and warmth does not also destroy" (p. 540). To fail to acknowledge this is to fail, I think, to be sufficiently postmodern. A too belligerent defense of unclarity could be seen as an attempt to escape from this kind of tragedy, an effort to find a firm and unassailable place to stand amidst the oppression of modern society—a rejection of the postmodern in defense of it.

The flipside of strategy, then, is tragedy.

Anything Goes? Questions of Structure and the "Material"

> Every week I receive critical commentaries and studies on deconstruction which operate on the assumption that what they call 'post-structuralism' amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language . . . and other stupidities of that sort. Certainly, deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic than traditional theories supposed. . . . But to distance oneself thus from the habitual structure of reference, to challenge or complicate our common assumptions about it, does not amount to saying that there is *nothing* beyond language.
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> —*Jacques Derrida* (1984, pp. 123-4)

There is a real danger in postmodern theorizing that we will begin to actually believe that all the world is just "text," that anything is possible, that nothing

really matters beyond the "play of signifiers" from which all the material pains of the world, the needs of poor children, the not-so-subtle dominations of a myriad terrible deprivations and indignations, are simply erased. More than a few have succumbed (at least momentarily) to just such a vision. As Michael Apple (1995) notes, some postmodernists have forgotten that "capitalism," for example, while it "may be in transformation, . . . still exists as a massive structuring force" (p. xi). In fact, however, as Derrida (1984) points out in the epigraph above, efforts to "challenge or complicate our common assumptions" about our place in the world, the structure of our culture, the workings of the economy, and more, do not *have to* "amount to saying that there is nothing beyond language." Laclau and Mouffe, and Popkewitz, discussed in more detail later on, are good examples of "postmodern" theorists who have not forgotten the importance of "material" reality.[4]

Drawing from and moving beyond the writings of Marx and Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe (e.g., 1985; Laclau, 1996; Mouffe, 1993) argue that all objects in the world, social or material, are constituted *as objects* only through discourse. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) thus reject any *clear* distinction between language and other objects. They argue that objects of all kinds (including rocks, concepts, coins, verbs, etc.) are the same in the sense that they only take on coherent *meaning* as a part of a discursive system. They note, however, that

> the fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought. . . . An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists . . . independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of "natural phenomena" or "expressions of the wrath of God", depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. (p. 108)

Objects exist in the world, but take on meaning only through the ways they interact with the many discursive systems in which they are enmeshed. In fact, from their perspective, discursive and material aspects of reality cannot be coherently isolated into separate realms, even if the distinction between them is metaphorically useful at times.

Thus, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) do not deny, for example, the importance of the economic system. They accept that for their democratic vision to succeed "it is necessary to put an end to capitalist relations of production, which are at the root of numerous relations of subordination" (p. 178). What they do deny is that there is any simple or singular way of describing these "relations of subordination," since different individuals or groups may understand/experience them in different ways. Further, they reject any implication that social structures are somehow "determined" in any way by some distinct and separate entity called the "economy," arguing that "social" constructs like race and gender are also material aspects of the world. As Anna Marie Smith (1998) points out, then, Laclau and Mouffe "do not hold that politics has become a game in which everything is equally possible and every position has equal value" (p. 56). Not all strategies are available, and engagement in some strategies may be unavoidable.

Thomas Popkewitz, who, in an article written with Marie Brennan (1997), agrees *with* Laclau and Mouffe that knowledge is a "material element in social life" (p. 288), takes a different yet, I would argue, ultimately complementary

view on the question of structural forces in society. Popkewitz might not too incorrectly be located as a member of what Stuart Hall (1992) calls the "governmentality school" of postmodern theory that draws especially from Foucault's (e.g., 1979) discussions of new ways people have been increasingly "governed" in the modern world. Against linear visions of progress, Popkewitz (1998a) stresses the complex and contradictory nature of social change. Looking back to the 19th century, for example, he argues that apparent efforts to limit the power of the state through "liberal" reforms were actually linked to new and more subtle forms of governance aimed to "teach" people to govern *themselves*. While some aspects of state control were relaxed, a range of "new forms of state practices nationalized issues of poverty and risk" through welfare and health projects while social sciences like psychology and pedagogy developed "in a manner parallel to the [new forms of] state bureaucracy . . . [providing] the disciplinary knowledge that linked the new civil institutions with the liberal democratic political rationalities of the state." In this way, he argues, a "historical conjunction" of a range of interrelated movements developed that focused on "the construction of a new type of citizen who, in a liberal democracy, would be an autonomous subject free from external policing" because she would do what she was supposed to do without actually being told (p. 3).

Popkewitz (1996) thus argues against the idea that there are some fundamental historical/natural forces, like capitalism, that underlie and direct social change. He notes, for example, that "while one can posit a generalized condition of capitalism as a background to the organization of power . . . [t]here is no one model for capitalism; neither is its history one of a single, unified development" (p. 29). Multiple changes in social practices (like teaching, psychiatry, business, etc.) take place at different times and for seemingly different reasons. While the shifts taking place in different arenas often work together in "historical trajectories," they often contradict each other as well. As "governmentality" scholar Nicholas Rose (1994) argues, such shifts do "not answer to any single logic or form part of a coherent programme of 'State intervention'" (p. 373). Thus, simple visions of *both* decentralization *and* of strong centralized control are misleading. This perspective, Popkewitz and Brennan (1997) argue, is not only more sensitive to the subtleties of social change; by removing "the linearity of much prevalent historical work," it also opens "spaces for multiple openings for contestation and redefinition" (p. 301).

As these examples from Laclau and Mouffe and Popkewitz indicate, to be "postmodern" it is not necessary for theorists to evade economic or other "structural" sources of oppression, even though they work constantly to complicate simple, monolithic ideas of "structure." Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that postmodern theorists often do have a tendency to focus on the fluidity of culture and discourse to the detriment of the more systematic economic and social aspects, something reflected in this paper as well. Smith (1998) notes, for example, that even Laclau and Mouffe "have not fully developed the political economy implications of their position" (p. 19). Perhaps there is something in the way that the postmodern theorists I describe here tend to value hybridity, difference, individual uniqueness, and multiplicity, in their foregrounding of cultural practices as key sites of struggle, in their general emphasis on micro- instead of macro-politics, and in their focus on discontinuity and complexity,

that leads many to either downplay the usefulness of structural metaphors or to avoid the idea of structure altogether. To the extent to which we (unpostmodernly) see postmodernism as a relatively bounded field, it would not be surprising if this field itself represented a limited perspective that still needed supplemental insights from other arenas. Apple (1993) is surely right, for example, when he argues, referring especially to Marx and his inheritors (although more structural aspects of feminism, for example, might fit as well. See Bordo, 1990), that "we, some of us at least, have tended to move too quickly away from traditions that continue to be filled with vitality and provide essential insights into the nature of curriculum and pedagogy that dominate schools at all levels" (p. 307). At the same time, however, other traditions are always evolving, of which critical race theory and postcolonial theory are prominent on the current scene.[5] In fact, some scholars, including Collins (1998) and Hartstock (1990), argue convincingly that this avoidance of issues of structure is at least partly a result of the relative privilege of many of the scholars who profess some of the same kinds of "postmodern" visions I discuss here. Soper (1993, p. 21) makes a similar claim about many postmodern rejections of "progress."

   Ultimately, postmodern theories will not matter unless they can participate in some way in the struggle to intervene in what are perceived to be the most oppressive conditions of our society (even as they complicate the very idea of oppression itself). The strategies I discuss below should be seen in this light, as different ways to understand how individuals and groups might resist the complex forces that restrict both what they can think and how they can act. As Smith (1998) notes in her discussion of Laclau and Mouffe,

> the question for theory . . . is not whether it perfectly corresponds to the real, for the real cannot be reduced to the concept. We should consider instead whether or not our necessarily imperfect theoretical concepts work well enough for our particular practical purposes. (p. 60)

   Again, however, postmodern thinkers tend to stress the uncertain and contradictory nature of any strategic intervention into the world. From this postmodern perspective, not only may what seems "good" from one perspective seem "oppressive" from another, but all efforts tend to produce an inextricable and largely unpredictable admixture of both. In a world in which only limited options present themselves to us we are always left in what Spivak (1993) calls "the useful but semimournful position of the unavoidable usefulness of something that is dangerous" (p. 5).[6]

Resources for Agency in Postmodern Writing

   In this section I argue that the strands of postmodernism I examine embody basic assumptions about the nature of the "human condition" as well as some general ideas about what better and worse conditions for humanity might be. For example, the theorists I have chosen to examine believe in different ways that although all human beings are socially constructed, we are all also utterly unique. This uniqueness is not a pre-social fact but instead arises continually our of each person's unique history of experiences *in the world*. These thinkers fear, however, each in their own ways, that alterity will not matter, that the subtle power of social systems will entirely submerge undefinable uniqueness

beneath socially established categories and roles. Thus, the desire to preserve and enhance alterity, or absolute otherness, is a crucial ethical impetus, explicitly or implicitly, of much postmodern work.

"Identity," as Spivak (1993) says, "is a very different word from essence. We 'write' a running biography with life-language rather than only word-language in order to 'be.' Call this identity!" (p. 4). Like Spivak, the scholars I examine below do not conceptualize "alterity" as some *deeper self* in each individual. Although postmodern writers often discuss, for example, how people's histories can be brought "to language," as it were, through narrative, they also acknowledge that any story can be told in an infinite number of ways. Thus, when she refers to the "experience" that constitutes the history of individuals, Spivak gestures towards something almost ineffable, not exactly a "thing" at all, something that can never be firmly pinned down, isolated, or expressed. In each of the theoretical frameworks I will discuss, then, an "agentic" self is not *revealed* but is instead what I think of as *coalesced* in a range of different ways from an individual's otherwise inchoate biography in the midst of particular circumstances, according to the guidelines of particular learned practices. Bonnie Honig (1995) explains that for Arendt, for example, "actors do not act because of what they already are, their actions do not express a prior, stable identity; they presuppose an unstable, multiple self that seeks its, at best, episodic self-realization in action and in the identity that is its reward" (p. 141).

Attempts to coalesce alterity into action or speech in the world are always deeply paradoxical and problematic, however. Emmanuel Levinas is perhaps the thinker who explores the challenges of alterity to the furthest extent. As Adriaan Peperzak (1993) notes, Levinas argues that while

> it is surely possible to talk to a[nother] speaker in order to reach him/her through language, . . . that by which the other is someone evaporates as soon as my language thematizes the utterance of a speech. . . . The Other, the Self, and Speaking . . . cannot enter the realm of the sayable because in their vulnerability and humility they are too originary for a thetic thought that would try to thematize them. (p. 29)

Alterity, Levinas argues, is simply too "other" to enter the conceptual structure of language.

To accept, as Levinas does, that alterity can never show itself in the conceptual world, would doom us to strategies for teaching freedom that cannot conceive of any way that one might coalesce at least hints of alterity in the world. As Paul Ricoeur (1992) notes, responding to what he sees as excesses in Levinas' discussion of alterity, if alterity is to *matter* we must be able to believe in the possibility of "awakening a responsible response to the other's call;" we must be able to bring alterity, somehow, coherently into the world (p. 339). This, I argue, is what many of the thinkers I discuss below attempt to do, even though they understand that, by definition, it cannot be achieved entirely, that, in fact, it is, by definition, not even possible to conceptualize what such an "achievement" might look like.

Despite all this talk about "agency," then, as I will show in my discussion of Popkewitz, especially, the idea of the "agent" remains, in most postmodern work, a fundamentally problematic idea. As many postmodern thinkers have

pointed out, the experience of acting, of declaring oneself to be a self-sovereign being, is a paradoxical one. While Derrida (1988), for example, does not *reject* the idea of an intentional agent, he questions "its character of being conscious or present to itself (actualized, fulfilled, and adequate)," acknowledging that the "enigma" of what intention *means* "grows increasingly obscure" for him as he examines it further (pp. 105 & 130).[7] In postmodern fashion, Derrida argues the concept of the intentional agent "*will not disappear; it will have its place*" even as his analysis renders "its rigor and purity impossible" (p. 59).

The corollary to the belief in alterity among postmodernists, is, as John McGowan (1991) argues, a deep fear of a monolithic, totalistic society. Thus, Lyotard's (1984) oft-cited definition of postmodernism as "an incredulity toward metanarratives" (p. xxiv) can be misleading. While postmodern writers generally believe that alterity cannot be entirely suppressed, and that simple forms of domination and "tradition" have increasingly fragmented, they nonetheless share a terror of a society in which spaces where alterity might emerge would be reduced to near invisibility. Many are deeply anxious that all "freedom" will increasingly turn out to be an illusion, that we will be unfree and that we will fail to recognize this fact. Far from believing it has already been achieved, postmodern writers generally strive mightily to *promote* an incredulity towards new and more fluid forms of "metanarrative," in an effort to resist totalitarian forms of society.

A fundamental paradox of the postmodern moment, however, is that there can be no coherent agency without entry into social practices. "The paradox of subjectification," of the creation of an "agent," Butler (1993) notes, "is precisely that the subject who would resist . . . norms is itself enabled, if not produced by . . . norms" (p. 15) or social practices. Even the most individualistic strategies for agency, such as that promoted by Richard Rorty (explored below), must, at least initially, be a learned social practice. Rorty must write a book, engaging his readers in an ultimately pedagogical relationship, "teaching" them a practice of freedom.

At times, some postmodern theorists, like Foucault, seem to flirt with a celebration of total anarchy as an answer to this problem (see Miller, 1993). And, as I noted, the stereotype of the "pomo" writer is of a person who has no commitments at all, who is just playing around, for whom "anything goes." While this may be true for some, however, McGowan (1991) argues that "we should recognize how fully the ideal of an egalitarian, pluralistic democratic order informs most postmodern work" (p. 28). The goal of analyses like Derrida's, for example, "is not to level democratic institutions to the ground but to open them up to a democracy to come," to overcome "forces that forestall in advance anything different or radically new" (Caputo, 1997, 44; see Derrida, 1992). Despite their fear of the totalitarian aspects of community, then, nearly all postmodern thinkers value some kind of ethical community and egalitarianism. They are constantly caught in a paradox of desiring and yet fearing particular strategies that promote community and freedom. And this is complicated even more, as I will try to show, by the tension between the achievement of collective power and the loss of individual alterity that comes with the creation of such collectives. As Chantal Mouffe (1996) points out, "it is important to recognize the limits to pluralism which are required by a democratic politics that aims at challenging a wide range of relations of subordination" (p. 246).

One way to think about postmodernism, then, is as an ultimately tragic commitment to respond ethically to contingency, and to live and act, as I have already noted, amidst unresolveable tensions. Caputo (1997) describes Derrida's "deconstruction," for example, as an attempt to pace "off the distance between" an impossible "justice" that would respond ethically to the singularity of every case, the alterity of every "other," "and the laws of any existing polity" (p 132). General rules, he continues, cannot hope to respond to any particular singularity without the action of an individual who stretches "the constraints of the law to include the demands of justice in a new, different, and singular situation" (p. 137) in ways that can never be predicted in advance, and never entirely justified afterwards.

Below, in addition to the ones I have discussed, I bring together a range of different theoretical perspectives that might inform efforts to teach freedom in a postmodern age. I have certainly not covered anything close to the possible range that might be discussed, adn I have already noted some of the limits inherent in my selection. Others would certainly have chosen differently. Some of the theorists, like Mouffe, seem pretty postmodern (despite her occasional critiques of postmodernism); others, like Noddings reflect fairly strong foundational commitments. Still others, like Arendt, cannot easily be placed in any particular camp.[8] Spivak might better be described as "post-colonial."[9] In the end, what I have been looking for are possible *resources* for teaching freedom from "postmodern" perspectives, whether or not the authors of these resources would conceptualize their projects in this manner (a particularly postmodern approach). I have attempted to read these thinkers carefully and respectfully, even though I may pursue implications of their work that they might not "intend."[10]

Thomas Popkewitz and the Challenge of Paralyzing Despair

Popkewitz's writings seem to present a special challenge to the idea that one could "teach freedom" from a "postmodern" perspective. In fact, Popkewitz's entire body of recent work has aimed at desconstructing the very idea of the sovereign subject, of people as coherent "agents." As a kind of manifesto, Popkewitz often cites the following passage from Michel Foucault:

> One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself . . . to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. . . . a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs its empty sameness throughout the course of history. (cited in Popkewitz and Brennan 1997, p. 297; see Popkewitz 1997a, p. 24; 1997b, pp. 146-47)

Popkewitz (1997b) thus agrees with Butler, who notes that "when the subject is taken uncritically as the locus of struggle for knowledge about enfranchisement and democracy, scholarship draws from the very models that have oppressed through the regulation and production of subjects" (p. 149). Popkewitz aims, instead, to understand "how available systems of ideas discipline individuals to act, think, and 'see' themselves in the world" (Popkewitz and Brennan, 1997, p. 305).

Within this vision of a world without identifiable agents in which individual "subjectivities" are constructed through the workings of power, any talk of *freedom* can take on a sinister tone. Treating individuals as if they were "agents" can become, paradoxically, a tool for control. In part by teaching people how they should *act as agents*, "social administration . . . [can] produce an individual's own freedom" (Popkewitz, 1997a, p. 22). Even the promotion of seemingly innocuous norms of "self-esteem" can bind "subjects to a subjection that is the more profound because it appears to emanate from our autonomous quest for ourselves; it appears as a matter of our freedom" (Rose, cited in Cruikshank, 1996, p. 235). Multiple interlocking fields of power (that both complement and contradict each other), work in part through the discourse of "agency" to produce individuals who are *free* in the *right way*.

It is from this perspective that Popkewitz (1996) critiques contemporary efforts to "empower" students and teachers. He notes, for example, that "constructivist strategies are intended to enable teachers to have the 'correct' dispositions and capabilities for effecting school reform . . . [and] constructivist pedagogies are not neutral strategies to teach 'problem solving'" (pp. 39-40). Thus, "the reform practices intended to democratize are social practices and governing strategies rather than ideals to strive towards" (Popkewitz, 1998a, pp. 24-25). Because "there are no essential notions of participation and problem solving," Popkewitz argues, "neither is there a historically undifferentiated" or neutral "notion of democracy" (p. 19).

While he seems in general agreement with Foucault's (1984) statement that "my point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous" (p. 343),[11] like Foucault, Popkewitz also implies that new efforts to promote collaboration and democracy in schools can actually be conceptualized in some ways as *more* dominating, more invasive and controlling, than older more crude strategies of control. Instead of simply telling people what to do, these strategies seek to harness the creativity and self-motivation of individuals.

If even "democracy" can be a form of domination, if treating people as if they were "agents" is actually a way to control them, however, what opportunities can be open for resistance? Sometimes Popkewitz seems to argue that this is a false problem. He and Brennan (1997) note, for example, that

> a rhetorical stance in the United States holds that if one does not make explicit, normative political commitments and emphasize the agentic subject in the knowledge of social science, no one will act and the people of the world will be incapacitated. This argument is an act of tremendous hubris as well as an odd historical argument. *We can point to no instance of people being incapacitated to act because of intellectual knowledge*; in fact, people typically act in ways that intellectuals do not approve of. (p. 313, italics mine)

This is a very odd argument, however. Does not their own work seek to influence the actions of their readers? Certainly (as I noted in my introduction) the complexity of "real" life vastly exceeds the attempts of any theory to encompass it. Yet, at the same time, as Popkewitz himself acknowledges at points (e.g., 1998a), different conceptions of how leadership and democracy should operate often (perhaps always) have fundamental effects on both action and how it is described.[12] Furthermore, while individuals surely act in unpredictable

ways despite whatever theoretical commitments they might hold, this seems less true of teachers who, as Popkewitz points out, seek to influence the agency of *others.* It is not unreasonable to ask how a teacher who took Popkewitz's arguments seriously but who was also committed to "empowering" her students might still be able to teach ethically. While I understand that Popkewitz argues that particular instantiations of power in the world cannot be labeled "good" or "bad," nonetheless, from his perspective, as I understand it, one could argue that the *better* a teacher did her job, the more subtle the practices of interaction and self-construction she promoted in her classroom, the more potential her work would have for domination. When Popkewitz makes statements like this, he appears to be trying to find an escape from the tragedy that I have argued is fundamentally intertwined with postmodernism.

It is when Popkewitz goes beyond such denials that I think he leads us to another strategy for conceptualizing freedom in the contradictory space of a postmodern perspective. At times Popkewitz argues that the kind of argument he is making *itself* constitutes an act of resistance, promoting a (peculiar) kind of agency among his readers. He and Brennan (1997) argue, for example, that their "social theory creates a space for undetermined agency by destabilizing the conditions that confine and intern consciousness and its principles of order" (p. 312). Popkewitz (1998a) argues, therefore, that he "paradoxically reintroduces a type of humanism" through his work that "occurs not by looking for the agent in the narrative of inquiry, but by destabilizing the conditions that confine and inter the possibilities for agency" (p. 25; see 1998b, p. 7).[13] "The strategy of historicizing the subject (decentering) is one which reinserts humanity into social projects through making the governing systems of order, appropriation and exclusion visible and confrontable" (Popkewitz, 1997b, p. 156).

As I read him, then, by essentially tracking down and destroying any coherent way to speak about "agents" or to conceptualize the teaching of "freedom," Popkewitz seeks to create the conditions necessary for agency. With the exception of fleeting gestures toward a kind of "performative" agency in citations of Butler (who is discussed in the next section) or Pierre Bordieu, Popkewitz's strategy is to "empower" his readers by systematically dismantling coherent ideas of empowerment.

His particular strategy still leaves him in a difficult conundrum, however, leaving little or no space within the internal "logic" of his writing for coherent conceptualizations (even in the most tentative way) of particular strategies for action. As he and Brennan (1997) note, their "decentering of the subject has its own sense of irony" and they ultimately accept that there is a "need to construct knowledge that can enable people to act intentionally" (p. 310; see Popkewitz, 1997b) even though they can't do it from their particular stance. Given the "logic" of his approach, the best he can do (as he notes in a recent book, for example) is to call for *others* "at a later time to explore the notions of resistance that stand within these power relations" (1998b, p. 33, see p. 57).

Popkewitz's writings, therefore, do embody a principled, even ethical, strategy for confronting oppression in modern society, providing a particular theoretical lens through which to view current dilemmas about empowerment in schools. In fact, in his confidence that agency is possible even when it has been entirely deconstructed there is a perhaps surprising faith in the power of human

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beings to engage in resistance despite the increasingly subtle barriers placed in their way.

Normalization

One way to conceptualize postmodernism is, as is clear in Popkewitz's work, a fear of "normalization," of the initiation of individuals into the accepted roles and positions of society that they then accept as their true identities. Yet, there is a sense in which "normalization" is one of the central tasks of schools, an activity without which schools would lose most of their meaning and power in our society. And many (not necessarily postmodern) theorists, like Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), and Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) have attempted to define what "better" and "worse" normalization might look like. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue, for example, that effectively learning a skill requires that one authentically join what they call a "community of practice," and that this can only be achieved by "unproblematic integration into [the] activity" of a particular community (p. 102). Lave and Wenger argue that when we become "literate" members of a community the roles and duties we learn become relatively transparent and extremely productive ways of working together with others. Thus they note that "one way to think of learning is the historical production, transformation, and change of persons" (p. 51), allowing transformed individuals access to the mastery that "resides. . . in the organization of the community of practice" itself (p. 94). Lave and Wenger argue, then, that truly effective educational practices are the ones that apprentice students as completely as possible in the shared practices, and communally defined and delimited "roles" of a community of practice. Without such integration, they worry, students will never be able to participate in society, or become productive citizens.

Like Lave and Wenger (1991), MacIntyre (1984) argues that the discourses of complex communities of practice are too complex ever to be codified into rules. Instead, full participants in communities of practice, such as the master tailors in Lave and Wenger's (1991) case from West Africa, develop and evolve their roles in the process of participating with others. To be a master tailor, in MacIntyre's (1984) terms, is not to act robotically but to participate in a kind of "conversation" in which a shared background of understanding both allows collective work to proceed efficiently *and* provides a shared ground for participants to disagree with each other in a coherent way. Thus, MacIntyre (1984) argues that in complex, flexible practices like these a level of creativity and agency is not only allowed but actually demanded as a criterion of excellence in the performance of one's role.

From the perspective of Lave and Wenger (1991) and MacIntyre (1984), however, only particular kinds of communities produce these kind of engaged "conversations." While the apprentice to a master tailor is on the road to becoming a master tailor herself and a participant in the process of re-inventing and evolving what the practice of tailoring *is*, a piece-worker in a sweatshop is not. The larger practice in a sweatshop is not designed to be responsive to the contributions of participants. It is not a "conversation" in this sense, and Lave and Wenger (1991) worry that the same is often true in schools.

There is, however, a group of theorists who argue that even in the most oppressive of circumstances there is room for the unpredictable performance of

one's roles, and/or opportunities for exploiting the contradictions that invari-
ably exist within the larger, never quite coherently structured, and always mul-
tiple discourse of one's community. Butler (1993), for example, argues that
because all lived practices are too complex to be stated in rules, they can exist
concretely only in the moment-to-moment "citations" of the individuals that
actually perform them. Thus, there is no way that the "law" of a practice can be
"given in a fixed form *prior* to its citation" (p. 14). Because such practices exist
only in the actual performances of individuals, the existence of a "prior author-
ity proves to be *derived from* the contemporary instance of its citation" (p. 109).
In other words, the rules of any social practice, even when written down, must
be performed if they are to have any real meaning, any real existence, and these
rules are always performed, in some sense, anew in each unique situation. Thus,
no matter how dominating a situation might be, it always leaves open the pos-
sibility of a creative citation of the "rules" that govern action (in fact, some
creativity is unavoidable). To some extent, this places a limit, for example, on
Popkewitz's fears (and he sometimes cites Butler in this light) because even if
the practice of democracy is defined ahead of time for participants, that practice
takes on material existence only through the always unpredictable activities of
participants.

A range of "postmodern" theorists argue in different ways that this kind of
performativity, both in the unpredictability of citation, and in the contradic-
tions and openings that result from practices that can never achieve total
systematicity (in part, *because* they only exist in citation) is the site of the most
promising possibilities of agency in our society. McGowan (1991), for example,
argues that "resistance, where it occurs, must take place within the daily prac-
tice of the social routines embodied in work, in family relations, and in various
economic and social exchanges" (p. 238).

Certainly these theorists are right that there is more possibility for agency in
our daily practices than initially might be visible within normalized visions of
discourse and community. But it is not clear to me why we should be satisfied
with such marginal instantiations of agency in the interstices of larger social
systems. While Michel de Certeau's work (cited in Conquergood, 1992) cel-
ebrates the "makeshift creativity" of oppressed workers, for example, he also
acknowledges the limits entailed in a strategy that requires resisters to act "within
the enemy's field of vision," a "nowhere [that] gives a tactic and a mobility, to
be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and
seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment"
(pp. 81-82). While such "tactics" might represent the only possibilities for con-
crete action among those who are imbedded in the most oppressive situations—
sweatshop workers, for instance—it is not entirely clear how much such persons
will gain through such action. In fact, some studies have shown that the "sys-
tem" may even encourage a kind of performativity, directing it to its own pur-
poses. Paul Willis's (1977) ethnography of working-class "lads" in England
maps out just such a reality in which the "oppositional" culture of the "lads"
actually plays into their own oppression, acting to prevent them from ever
moving out of the working-class. As Popkewitz shows, by creating the "illu-
sion" of freedom, practices that appear to operate as "conversations" can ulti-
mately enmesh participants even more deeply in the workings of power. In fact,

James C. Scott (1990) points out that the planning of what he calls "hidden transcripts" of resistance often require a "public—even if that public necessarily excludes the dominant" (p.118). These hidden social spaces, he argues, "as domains of power relations in their own right . . . serve to discipline as well as to formulate patterns of resistance" (p.119), patterns, I will argue, that do not need to operate entirely on the model of a MacIntyre-like conversation.

A second kind of "agency" that is often linked to what I have called "normalization" theories of resistance can be seen as arising from conflicts *between* discourses. However, this is often represented in an extremely problematic fashion. For example, although MacIntyre (1984) acknowledges that an individual action within a particular practice ultimately are made intelligible by that "particular individual's history of action, belief, experience and interaction" (p. 29), alluding to a kind of postmodern alterity, in the end his work is almost entirely focused on social change as a result of the clashing of multiple social fields. At times it seems almost as if the social practices themselves are engaging, relatively unencumbered by the unique individuals that carry them, as if they were mass "subjects" themselves. As Butler (1993) notes, in views like MacIntyre's there is always the danger that "discourse or language or the social becomes personified" (p. 9). When not taken to this extreme, however, there are powerful resources resident in viewing one discourse through the "lens" of another.[14]

While one may need to take action within the possibilities invariably available in the interstices of particular practices, or in the differences between different "discourses," I will argue that these are not the only options. Instead, with Scott (1990), I imagine a myriad of layers of different (often undefined, overlapping, and fluid) spaces, that often embody fundamentally different *kinds* of social practices or collections of practices. Perhaps we can think of these as spaces for the teaching/learning/invention of new forms of resistance, of fundamentally different ways of conceptualizing both agency and community.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that schools, especially, will always, must always, continue to be spaces that seek to normalize students into shared practices, although *whose* practices should always be an open question. As Habermas (1987), Dewey (1916) and many others have shown, we are able to exist as a complex society because most of what we do is "transparent" to us. As McGowan (1991) points out, most of our lives are spent in "the simple repetition of various routinized activities [that] reinforce the lifeworld without agents consciously . . . reflecting on the whys and wherefores of their actions" (p. 239). The practices of agency described below, although they may seem much more promising from the point of view of efforts to nurture alterity and resistance, are, for that very reason, much less able to participate in this reproductive activity of society. In fact, children will always need to be initiated into the practices of communities, into the roles and skills (they are inseparable) that will enable them to participate in the reproductive activities of society and to contribute coherently to the ongoing conversations of different communities of practice. Alterity, I will argue, always operates on the margins of normalizing social practices of the kind MacIntyre and, more complexly, Popkewitz describe.

Before I move on, however, it is important to emphasize that all social practices are not open equally to all members of a society. As Gee (1990) notes, individuals are initiated into what he calls "primary" discourses in their home

communities and families. To the extent to which the discourses of some com-
munities differ from and even conflict with the discourses that provide access to
different material resources and forms of power in that society, members of
marginal communities may have difficulty picking up these discourses. Mem-
bers of some communities may even need to repudiate aspects of their home
communities in order to "succeed" in the dominant arenas of society. Many,
however, will "transform dominant discourses for liberatory purposes" (Depit,
1995, p. 162), and will find a source of critique in oppositional discourses. And
some will find their entry into and efforts to contest dominant discourses blocked
or hampered regardless of their efforts because of the various "marks" of mar-
ginal status—skin color, accent, gender, and so forthCthat they carry (see
Popkewitz, 1998b; Williams, 1991).

Aesthetics and Caring

"Aesthetic" and "caring" approaches to agency represent, to some extent, the
opposite of normalized approaches. Whereas normalization initiates individuals
into shared communal practices in which they must act, however flexibly, within
the strictures of their "roles," caring and aesthetic models focus on actualizing
the uniqueness of each individual.

Aesthetic Self-Creation

For the purposes of this paper, Richard Rorty is perhaps the best exemplar of
a thinker who promotes an "aesthetic creation" vision of agency, although there
are rough similarities to his approach in the work of John Dewey, Maxine Greene,
and others. As with other postmodernish thinkers, Rorty (1989) does not believe
individuals have some pre-social, core "self" "to which language needs to be
adequate" (p. 21). Instead, Rorty agrees with Nietzsche who, he says, "saw self-
knowledge as self-creation," in other words, that examining who one is, telling
a story about oneself, involves not just self-discovery but invariably a creative
process of self-invention. Rorty argues, therefore, that "the process of coming to
know oneself, confronting one's contingency, tracking one's causes home, is
identical with the process of inventing a language—that is, thinking up some
new metaphors" (p. 27). Rorty imagines what he calls, after Harold Bloom, the
"strong poet" who "somehow makes tangible the blind impress all one's
behavings bear" (p. 29). As should be clear from Rorty's description, however,
this activity of self-creation is not entirely free; instead, it involves a creative
interaction with one's past, a bringing of what Spivak (1994) describes as one's
ineffable fund of "experience" to language. Rorty's (1989) strong poet seeks to
create new metaphors, a new language that is more "true" to her idiosyncratic
history of experiences than the cultural practices into which she has been initi-
ated.

Dewey (1934) is helpful, here, speaking similarly of the possibilities inherent
in artistic interaction. Although, in contrast to Rorty, he is more focused on
interaction with one's environment than on developing a unique self, he sounds
much like Rorty when he notes that as one engages in a work of art, "past
experiences more and more give meaning to what is done" (p. 278). Increas-
ingly, perception informed by one's unique experience complicates the pre-
established lenses provided by one's learned cultural practices. Like Rorty's

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strong poet, Dewey's (1934) aesthetic perceiver never knows where aesthetic activity will take her, since

> there is always a gap between the here and now of direct interaction and the past interactions whose funded result constitutes the meanings with which we grasp and understand what is now occurring. Because of this gap, all conscious perception involves a risk; it is a venture into the unknown, for as it assimilates the present to the past it also brings about some reconstruction of that past. (p. 272)

It is important to note, however, that Rorty and Dewey both acknowledge that aesthetic activity is always marginal to the larger structure of normalized society. As Rorty (1989) says, "there can be no fully Nietzschean lives, lives which are pure action rather than reaction—no lives which are not largely parasitical on an un-redescribed past. . . . [E]ven the superman['s metaphors will be] . . . inevitably minor and marginal" (p. 42). Aesthetic activity must always be precarious in relation to the established power of social norms and expectations.

Rorty's particular take on aesthetic activity is important because, while he celebrates the possibilities for "aesthetic" individuality, he nonetheless fears the prospect of an entire society of strong poets. He worries that a community of people aiming at the enhancement of their unique visions could only result in anarchy (Buscemi, 1993). He warns that those who are focused on aesthetic self-creation are in danger of becoming aesthetic monsters, disconnected from, and, in fact, actively deconstructing, the kind of shared moral sense that MacIntyre values in their relentless efforts to break through the shell of shared social practices (Wain, 1995). He worries that aestheticists may harm those around them through their efforts of redescription, unaffected by how this may humiliate others. Thus Rorty (1989) recommends that aesthetic self-creation be isolated in what he terms the "private" away from a more MacIntyre-like public, making aesthetic activity safe for society.

Many have critiqued whether such a stark solution could actually be workable, however. Noddings (1996), for example, notes that a society of strong poets will, in all probability, be unable to make a real commitment to a shared social practice that, in the end, none of them really believe in. Thus, I raise the possibility that, despite his strenuous efforts to respond to many critiques like this, his public/private distinction may represent yet another failed attempt to escape tragedy, to close Pandora's box after it has been opened in his work.

Although Rorty (1989) fears a society of strong poets, he does think that their activity can have a potentially positive impact on the larger world. As I read him, the strong poet accomplishes this by disseminating artistic objects that are not focused on actual (or identifiable) individuals. He describes two ways these products can impact on larger society. First, the work of strong poets can end up changing the shared practices of a community. Artistic "metaphors" can become a part of "plain, transparent languageCthe sort of language which is ascribed not to any particular person but to 'common sense' or 'reason' or 'intuition,' ideas so clear and distinct you can look right through them" (p. 152). These are what Rorty calls "dead metaphors" in that they alter *common sense*, representing powerful conversational contributions to what MacIntyre (1984) sees as an ongoing social dialogue.

Some new metaphors, some artistic productions, however, remain rooted in the particular. These "live" metaphors, as Rorty (1989) calls them, emphasize the idiosyncrasy of experience, focusing on the unsettling, surprising, unexpected details of life, helping people break through what Greene (1988) often calls the "banal" stereotypes of our taken-for-granted world. Art of this kind, Dewey (1934) notes, "insinuates possibilities of human relations not to be found in rule and precept, admonition and administration" (p. 349). Thus, Dewey argues that "those who have the gift of creative expression in unusually large measure disclose the meaning of individuality of others to those others" (p. 114). Further, by bringing people into contact with new forms of alterity, Rorty (1989) hopes that some artistic objects might teach us new ways that people can be humiliated, helping us learn to create communities that are increasingly inclusive.

Drawing on Dewey, Rorty, and many others, and engaging in a range of efforts to promote aesthetic education more broadly in schools, Greene (1987) has helped to create, for example, the Lincoln Center Institute, which seeks to initiate students and teachers into "aesthetic" practices of freedom. The Institute helps participants move beyond a simplistic "consumerist" approach to art and artistic creation, encouraging them to "make a deliberate effort to combat blankness and passivity and stock responses and conformity" (p. 15). At the Institute, professional artists initiate students into the "disciplines, the languages, the modes of artistry, the craft that identify their particular art forms" (p. 18).

There is, of course, a deep and abiding paradox in efforts like these to *teach* aesthetics, something Rorty does not address. To become artists, students must be initiated into a *discipline* of creativity, into *practices* of alterity. Art does not emerge out of a vacuum, but out of a long history of efforts in dance, painting, literature, and more. One can feel Greene (1987) struggling with this inescapable conundrum central to the teaching of freedom when she notes, for example, that students should be taught the "symbol systems associated with the various arts," even though she argues, in contrast to Lave and Wenger (1991) and MacIntyre (1984), that these systems are learned "not simply to conceptualize, or join the great 'conversation' going on over time," (p. 20), but rather as practices to help them tease their own and other's alterity into interaction with the world.

It is, of course, dangerous to collapse Dewey, Greene, and Rorty's visions of aesthetic activity together. Greene's discussion of aesthetic activity, for example, is different from and much richer than Rorty's, perhaps in part because she is constantly engaged in the difficult effort of actually teaching freedom with students and teachers. Certainly the fact that artistic education of this kind involves learning "disciplines" and often also involves *collective* efforts to create music, put on plays, and more, complicates Rorty's fears about the anarchic and isolative power of aesthetics. At the same time, however, I am convinced that Rorty's fear of the aesthetic monster is well taken. As the alterity of individuals (and different groups) in a community increases, what is shared must attenuate. As Greene (1987) notes, quoting Denis Donahue, "the margin is the place for those feelings and intuitions which daily life doesn't" and, I would add, sometimes *can't* "have a place for" (p. 13).

Caring[15]

It is not unreasonable to see Noddings's practice of caring as designed, in part, to provide a solution to the paradoxes and dangers of aesthetic activity, which Rorty explores. In fact, Noddings (1984) is deeply concerned about "artistic monsters" (p. 22) who care about "things" and not people (see also Noddings, 1996). Instead of isolating alterity away from the world, as Rorty recommends, however, Noddings's model of caring seeks to make uniqueness safe by nurturing it in the midst of relationships with other people.

In Noddings's model, a "carer" focuses, not on generating a new language for herself, but on enhancing the alterity of others, on developing a form of relational instead of isolated selfhood. Caring, for Noddings, represents an attempt to be authentically "present" to the "otherness" of another. As Noddings (1984) notes, in caring, "although I can never accomplish it, entirely, I try to apprehend the reality of the other" (p. 14). Caring involves giving over aspects of one's motive power to a cared-for, essentially letting go of much of one's own reality in order to truly receive and enhance the "world" of the cared-for (p. 14). Although Noddings (1984) argues that this model of caring draws from *natural* tendencies of human beings, she is nonetheless quite clear that caring is learned; she notes, for example, that without an "apprenticeship" in caring, "not everyone develops the capacity to care" (Noddings, 1992, p. 18).[16]

Carers "act" by responding to the unique needs of each cared-for, escaping as much as possible the normalizing practices that govern society. Each act of caring requires that a carer construct a rich and singular account of the specific situation of a cared-for, relating her own unique history of caring and the history of the cared-for as she understands it to the complex context under consideration. Thus, what caring *means* shifts as one moves through different relationships with different individuals. In contrast to Rorty's vision of the isolated strong poet, then, selfhood in caring is dispersed through one's myriad relationships with carers and cared-fors. Both carers and cared-fors build unique *relational* selves through unique relations with specific others; both carers and cared-fors enhance their alterity through this process.

On the surface, then, Noddings might seem to have discovered an answer to Rorty's fear of anarchy, since caring seems to nurture the kind of alterity Rorty desires within an ethical framework and amidst relationships. But, in fact, both the kind of community and the depth of alterity caring is able to generate are limited. Noddings (1984) is quite clear, for example, that each relation with an "other" is exclusive. One cannot "care" for groups, only specific individuals. And the "world" looks differently through the eyes of each cared-for. Caring thus involves a myriad of unique paired relations of "carers" and "cared-fors," forming, in the ideal, a *splintered* collection of unique relationships without any common "world" that is shared across an entire group. Although this forms a kind of community in which all members are linked through series of caring relationships, there is no way for this community to act as a collective. In fact, the very idea of a "collective" identity that would deny the uniqueness of any relation or individual is anathema to caring. A caring community, then, is deeply interconnected, but cannot ever form a coherent "we."

Further, it is unlikely that Rorty would be satisfied with the kind of alterity the practice of caring allows. For Rorty, being fully a-moral and operating as

much as possible outside any social practice seems crucial to efforts that aim to generate unpredictable change and autonomy. By limiting the kinds of "languages," "metaphors," and "selves" carers can imagine, individual alterity is unavoidably attenuated. Noddings's caring, then, does not represent a solution to the problems of individual uniqueness raised by Rorty. Instead, it embodies a particular and ultimately limited effort to balance the competing demands of alterity and community.

The Public[17]

Arendt, from whose writings I have drawn the practice of the "public," is the theorist of freedom who is perhaps the most clear on the necessity of a trade-off between alterity and collective action. Like Rorty (1989), for example, Arendt worries that the unrestricted promotion of alterity "runs the risk of ruling out of existence all that humans *qua* humans have in common" (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1991, p. 445). Nor, Arendt argues, can Martin Buber's "dialogic" philosophy—which is very similar to Noddings's "caring"—"become paradigmatic for the politcal sphere" (1978, p. 200). Because it destroys the common nature of a public space by disclosing the full uniqueness of individuals, caring (she says "love"), is "not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of antipolitical forces" (Arendt, 1958, p. 242).[18] It is in part by restricting alterity, then, that Arendt's vision of the public can allow the emergence of precarious collectives.

Arendt (1958) argues that to allow political "action," there must be what she calls an "in-between" of common issues that "must be seen [by participants] . . . in a variety of aspects without changing their identity" (p. 57). In other words, everyone in a public space must be able to arrive at her own interpretation of a common effort or issue, while not interpreting it so idiosyncratically that its "common" nature is lost. Participants in public spaces gain thereby the ability to "appear" in a coherent "location" to the others in that space, to take up one of an infinite number of possible interpretive positions with respect to common issues, and to make contributions that alter the issue itself. One becomes an "agent" with other agents in such a public space not because one convinces others to join one's side, but because one can participate in a common project. Thus, in a public space people act *with* others by bringing their unique potential to bear upon common efforts, generating an immense force for creative change that no participant can ever control or even predict. Arendt's public space does not, therefore, promote "consensus." Even though people may often change their perspectives, and thus their "positions" in public in response to the contributions of others, no two people can ever occupy the same "location," no matter how long they talk. As in caring, alterity is diminished but not eliminated.

Arendt (1958) is quite clear, however, that the particular practice she is describing can operate only on a very local level. When a space becomes so large that it is impossible for participants to keep track of the individual, unique positions of the others in that space, the myriad locations that constitute a public threaten to collapse into collective, mass, identities. Although Arendt (1963) attempts to envision what she calls a "council system" that could operate on a larger scale by having different local publics report up through a

pyramidal structure of representative publics, she never really explores this idea in any detail. Her failure to do this may arise, in part, from the fact that her "council system" actually seems to contradict crucial aspects of her vision. It would require individual representatives to "represent" the complex dialogue of one public space into another, something that, under her model, would seem an impossibly complex task (for empirical examples of this problem see Mansbridge, 1992).

I end this section with an example of how Arendt's idea of the public might be appropriated into (or illuminate) an educational context. Ann Lieberman and Maureen Grolnick (1996) have recently explored a teaching reform strategy they call "teacher networks" that seems to embody aspects of Arendt's vision.[19] Representing one strategy for moving beyond the hierarchical, bureaucratic structure of schools, teacher networks create "'public spaces' in which educators can work together in ways that are different in quality and kind from those typical of their institutions" (p. 25). Lieberman and Grolnick note that success-ful networks "rally prospective participants to a particular cause, idea, or set of connections" (p. 10). And these shared issues appear to be interpreted differ-ently by different participants, shifting in response to contributions made by different group members. As Arendt would predict, however, these networks struggle with issues of size, always threatening to become more bureaucratic. Further, the egalitarian aspect of networks should not be overemphasized. In agreement with Arendt's model, without some limits, however tenuous, on what counts as a proper interpretation of their shared cause, it would seem that there can *be* no coherent network. And this need to make distinctions, however blurred and fluid, between acceptable and unacceptable interpretations may systemati-cally exclude some groups (see Delpit, 1995, chapter 2).

Radical Democracy

Critics often complain about what Landon E. Beyer and Daniel P. Liston (1992) call the "postmodern valorization of local and diffused actions" (p. 375). And it is true, as McGowan (1991) argues, that postmodern thinkers tend to cherish "the particularized *habitus* of smaller groups" (p. 29). Noddings's car-ing, for example, is restricted to a limited circle of individuals with whom one can have face-to-face relations, whereas Arendt's public, as I just noted, can operate only on a relatively small scale. It is important to acknowledge, how-ever, that even those "postmodern" thinkers who focus on the local see local action as contributing in complex ways to the transformation of broader society. Rorty sees his isolated "strong poet," for example, as potentially shifting the very *common sense* of the larger society, however marginally, with his pen. Nonetheless, Beyer and Liston, among many others, are surely right that to limit oneself to local political practices, especially in a world increasingly dominated by world-spanning capitalist organizations, would be extremely disempowering. It is crucial, therefore, to examine a "postmodern" strategy that grapples directly with the challenges of action on the scale of a nation or a society. The work of Laclau and Mouffe provides an excellent example. As usual, however, this shift to a broader stage involves new restrictions on alterity.

Drawing especially from the work of the linguist, Ferdinand Saussure, Laclau and Mouffe argue that that terms and identities can take on concrete meaning

not through their direct correspondence to things in the "real world" (which exist coherently only *through* description) but by distinguishing themselves from other terms, through *opposition*. A car is a "car" only because one can distinguish it from horses, motorcycles, bicycles, and so forth. To be a woman, one must be able to distinguish oneself from men. As Mouffe (1993) notes, for example, "the condition of existence of every identity is the affirmation of a difference, the determination of an 'other' who is going to play the role of a 'constitutive outside'" (p. 2). To be an "us" there must be "thems" that define the boundaries of our "shared" identity.

The vast collection of differences that forms the system of language and of identity, however, can never entirely succeed in creating a totalizing system. Individuals, for example, are always "overdetermined" by multiple identities that overlap, conflict, and contradict each other in complex ways. Thus, the relational system that Laclau and Mouffe see as constituting our society "only exists as a partial limitation of a 'surplus of meaning' which subverts it;" "the relational logic" that allows identities to take on coherent form is always "incomplete and pierced by contingency" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp. 111, 110). The borders of a group's identity are never quite achieved.

Because identities are always created through their relationships to other identities, Laclau and Mouffe argue that identities are actually dependent on and, in some sense, a part of the identities that oppose them. This means that an oppressed group, for example, "cannot assert its identity without asserting that of the oppressor as well" (Laclau, 1996, p. 29). "There is," he argues, therefore, "no major historical change in which the identity of *all* intervening forces is not transformed" (p. 50); "any victory against the system also destabilizes the identity of the victorious force" (p. 27).

Laclau and Mouffe tend to distinguish between two different ways such oppositionally defined collectives can come into existence, even though this is really a functional distinction, a difference of degree not quality. First, a group can form in response to particular challenges in its environment, as, for instance, a labor union might in order to wrest concessions from a particular employer. While one can see similarities between this and Arendt's vision, it is important to recognize that Laclau and Mouffe are focused on how such struggles form themselves as tenuous collectives, and not on how such efforts might, in certain circumstances, allow individuals a kind of unique identity. Even on the level of relatively specific conflicts, however, the formation of a coherent opposition requires that a myriad of unique workers with unique interests and perspectives be tenuously collected into a "shared" identity of "labor," for example, that can be clearly distinguished from/through its opposition to "management," a distinction that cannot avoid being pierced by inconsistencies and imperfections.

A second level of collective identity arises when multiple groups of this kind, each with their own *relatively* local and specific goals, perspectives, and practices of collective action, are drawn together into more broad-based collectives by what Laclau and Mouffe call a "chain of equivalences." Such a coming together of different groups could happen even on the scale of an individual company, when, for example, teachers and custodians join together to strike a school district even though their aims, positioning in the district, and collective practices may be very different. In fact, part of the strategy of a successful strike

might include extending this "chain of equivalences" to other groups employed by and even outside of the district.

Laclau (1996) argues that, as the relationship between particular struggles expands into what they call a "hegemonic" relationship (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 143), the at least partially imaginary shared goals of these groups become instantiated in an "empty signifier" that is increasingly (though never entirely) emptied of its particular content. Laclau (1996) uses the example of Perónism from Argentina, noting that

> After the coup of 1955 which overthrew the Perónist regime, Argentina entered a period of institutional instability which lasted for over twenty years. Perónism and other popular organizations were proscribed. . . . So, there was a succession of less and less representative regimes and an accumulation of unfulfilled democratic demands. These demands were certainly particular ones and came from very different groups. The fact that all of them were rejected by the dominant regimes established an increasing relation of equivalence between them. This equivalence, it is important to realize, did not express any essential a priori unity. . . . Perón himself, . . . being very careful not to take any definitive stand in the factional struggles within Perónism, . . . was in ideal conditions to become the 'empty signifier' incarnating the moment of universality in the chain of equivalences which unified the popular camp. (pp. 54-55)

While participation in such an "alliance" "modifies the very identity of the forces engaged" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 184), the different groups can still maintain a relative autonomy. It is not surprising, then, that once Perón returned, when he "had to carry out concrete politics" (p. 55), he was unable either to integrate or to respond effectively to the multiple demands of these different groups (whose identities were themselves changed by "winning").

Like "Perón," concepts such as "democracy" and "tradition" can also serve as empty signifiers, as can terms like "labor" and "management," as I noted above. Laclau's Perón example is especially useful, however, because it highlights the fact that any signifier must necessarily be drawn from the particulars available at a given historical moment. As Anna Marie Smith (1998) notes, this is not a simply "voluntarist" vision of social change; such efforts always operate within already created structures of power "that delineate what is possible, what can be said and done, what positions may be legitimately taken, what actions may be engaged in, and so forth" (Norval, cited in Smith, 1998, p. 64) by different participants.

Laclau and Mouffe argue that there are a range of implications of their description of the nature of politics for democratic society. Mouffe (1993) argues, for example, that "the illusion of consensus and unanimity . . . should be recognized as being fatal for democracy and therefore abandoned" (p. 5). "A healthy democratic process," she says, "calls for a vibrant clash of positions and an open conflict of interests" (p. 6). In agreement with recent comments by Derrida, they argue that this requires the development of some rules, however problematic these must inevitably be (Laclau, 1996; Mouffe, 1993). Mouffe (1993), for example, argues that "politics calls for *decision* and, despite the impossibility of finding a *final* grounding, any type of political regime consists in establishing a *hierarchy* among political values" (pp. 151-152). Only by maintaining the precariousness of this necessary balance between unity and diversity can de-

mocracy survive. Democracy for Laclau and Mouffe, then, is an achievement that is contingent, that "may come under threat and has to be defended" even though one can never be sure what *democracy* means, even though democracy "will . . . always be a democracy to 'come'" (Mouffe, 1993, pp. 132 and 8; see Laclau, 1996, p. 79). It is, in fact, fundamentally the *inability* to know what democracy is, this undecidable tension that leaves unpredictable options permanently open, that allows democracy to exist at all.

As an attempt to envision a postmodern politics that rejects foundational visions of truth, maintains an understanding of individual alterity, and yet allows large scale political action, Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical framework is very powerful. As with the others I have examined, however, there are also deep limitations. First, their model tends to operate on a level of abstraction even higher than the others I have discussed. It is difficult to imagine what these "collectives" would exactly look like or how they might be organized. In fact, Laclau's discussion of Perónism, in its schematic explanation of years of social unrest indicates the extent to which their theory can sometimes oversimplify the myriad and complex operations of social change (see also Adam, 1993). This tendency towards abstraction (to some extent unavoidable, as I have noted) would not be so troubling if it were not deeply intertwined with a second problem: the sense that they think they have found in their theory of "oppositional" identity the "answer" that provides a "true" map for political action in our current historical moment.[20] While both Laclau and Mouffe often note that their work represents an exploration of possible "strategies," all of these strategies operate under the umbrella of a *single* theory of identity. They often imply (and sometimes seem to declare) that there can be no other coherent approach to identity, and thus to political action, but their own (see, e.g., Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 128). Yet, as I hope the other sections of this paper have shown, there are, in fact, myriad ways in which one could conceive of political action that involve a range of approaches to "identity." While Laclau and Mouffe may be right that the formation of collective identities with clear borders requires contrasts with other identities, approaches like those of Rorty, Noddings, and Arendt, among others, do not appear to require or even promote such defined identities. While Arendt's public surely excludes, it does not do so by creating some clear boundary between one "public space" and another; in fact, Arendt explicitly resists any effort to form the kind of collectives Laclau and Mouffe discuss. For her part, Noddings's carers and cared-fors actually discard the idea of borders to one's identity or "locations" for oneself entirely, developing dispersed selves with no clear boundaries at all.[21]

As a particular strategy for conceptualizing social action in a world without clear foundations, however, I would argue that Laclau and Mouffe's work can be extremely useful. Their work can help educators and students ask a range of questions about social action that the other theories I have discussed cannot. One can detect in the education literature, for example, a tendency to valorize rich, local forms of democracy—like Arendt's—in class discussions, student government, and so forth. The work of Laclau and Mouffe might begin to help us recognize limitations in these seemingly progressive commitments, teasing out some of the ways that restricting ourselves to such local forms may subtly disempower our students. Their work might press us to imagine ways to teach students practices that might allow them to engage in social action on a larger

scale. Their work may encourage us to ask such questions as: What are the different ways individuals might participate in relatively large collective iden- tities? What kinds of individual efficacy might individuals gain and lose in such structures? What might motivate individuals and smaller groups to engage in such enormous and loosely structured coalitions? How might different groups in a school, or beyond the school, develop "chains of equivalence" across dif- ferent identities and efforts? Can students begin to imagine how they might have to change "who" they are if they succeed in their effort to produce change? All of these and more, I think, are crucial questions for us to ask if we intend to "teach freedom" in the schools, no matter how problematic such an effort al- ways is.

"It Is Not That We Must Not Take Sides . . ."

> It is not that we must not take sides. . . . It is just that the decisive testing
> of the intellectually clear "thought"—which can construct systemic ways
> and means of avoiding logical risks through the fine-tuning of knowl-
> edge—must therefore be in "action," the element of which is the risky
> night of non-knowledge. . . . [I]n effect, practice norms theory.
> —*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (1994, pp. 25-26)

Here at the end, I return to the issues I raised in my introduction about the dangers involved in attempting to "apply" theory into particular contexts. I draw from Roberta Herter's (1998) rich case study of an attempt by a group of white middle- to upper-class university students enrolled in an English course entitled "Theater and Social Change" to work with a group of working-class African American students in a central city Detroit high school. Guided by Freire (1970) and Augusto Boal's (1979) largely Freirean *Theatre of the Op- pressed*—writings given to them in their English classt—he college students sought to engage the high school youth in the development of political theater. Although these writings are generally classified as "critical theory," I argue that Herter's analysis of the theater project illuminates fundamental dilemmas and dangers involved in theoretically informed efforts to "teach freedom," espe- cially to those from contexts, experiences, cultures, and positionings different from one's own.[22]

The college students arrived in Detroit intending to "learn from" and col- laborate with the high school youth as equals (Herter, 1998, p. 159). Yet, the texts the college students read in their English course "could not quite capture the complexity of the group of students they would meet at the high school; neither had their suburban high schools prepared them for an inner-city class- room" (p. 158). The conflictual space of the project was imbued with differences of privilege, race, geography, and institutional constraints, among many other issues. The college students made their effort to abandon "the rules of classroom discourse" even more difficult by attempting simply to deny "their teacherly roles" instead of actively grappling with the complexities of their situatedness in this particular context (p. 171). In fact, the college students appeared to hold a deficit model of the high school students, framing their own roles as those of "helpers" seeking "to make a difference in their [the high school students'] lives" (p. 159). Ultimately, Herter's analysis shows that the college students' apparently dialogic engagement with the youth, through a subtle use of ques-

tioning strategies, actually "became a way of controlling the behavior of the high school youth, limiting their responses, and contradicting the declaration of shared authority that" as I note below "the high school youth had rejected" (p. 162).

This deficit vision was compounded and fed by the college students' apparent belief that their interpretation of the model of social struggle they received in their class described the *true* and only legitimate form for a theatrical politics. As described in the university course's description, theirs was an effort to "form small groups to perform, in nontraditional spaces, street, action, and guerrilla theater pieces advocating social change" (p. 157). As the college students enacted it, Boal's model involved encouraging the high school youth to develop theatrical scenes out of their actual life experiences, ultimately engaging audiences in "dramatic confrontation in order to display everyday complicity in various forms of oppression" (p. 159). This model led the college students to "focus on [the] lived experience" of the high school youth as the only legitimate content "suitable for performance," an approach that "put the college students in the position of judging what life experiences were valid and available as products of classroom conversation" (p. 162).

In fact, however, the high school youth began the project with a set of interests and expectations very different from those of the college students. At the most basic level, the youth sought to "substitute something a little different for the traditional American Literature course," (p. 157) hoping that the project would "teach them principles of acting, would give them a chance to perform and have fun, and would allow them to meet new people" (p. 159). Furthermore, it became clear as the project progressed that at least some of the youth did in fact have their own notions of the transformative possibilities of theater, notions they pursued and developed in opposition to the college students' attempts to suppress them. Instead of performing actual experiences, some of the high school students explored the potential for contrasting "the everyday level of their lives with an *imagined* ideal" (p. 161, italics added). Some of the youth argued, for example, that "they didn't want to be themselves in scenes," as "they felt that they were already familiar with their own experience and wanted to try on *new* ways of being" (p. 162, italics added). In this alternative vision, Herter argues, these youth "attempted to find in their imaginations a new identity, a possible self, a moral 'I' . . . [disclosing and defining] themselves ontologically as they sought respect, dignity, and compassion through the lives and life situations of the characters they created" (p. 167). Understood from the perspective of the high school students, then, the "college students' understandings" of "Freirean notions of power, empowerment, and invention . . . [became] objects of a theoretical and ideological gaze fixed on them through the college students' understandings of community service as a mode of empowering the high school youth" (p. 169-70).

Herter's point is not that the ideas the college students brought with them were entirely irrelevant to the lives of the high school students. She notes, for example, that the college students' vision of "street theater politics disrupted the high school students' understanding of theater as imaginative play," broadening their perspectives on the nature of the political (p. 172). Furthermore, it is difficult to deny that the theater practices developed by Boal (especially when

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interpreted with more subtlety) have potential to inform efforts to struggle against oppression in different contexts. And the participants did, in fact, produce theater pieces. The problems arose, however, when the college students' life experiences and privilege, institutional pressures, and issues of race and class and more (as they took on meaning in that context) became intertwined with a reading of Boal's and Freire's theoretical perspectives as representing *truths* about the nature of political theater and social action.

Herter argues, in part, that constructing a more egalitarian dialogic relationship between the two groups would have helped mitigate these challenges. She points, for example, to the limited understanding each group had of the other, and the fact the college students' focus on eliciting experiences from the high school youth left "the college students' lives . . . unexposed" (p. 160). Further, she argues that because the college students never "directly shared their understanding of liberatory theater with the high school students" this left the youth "confused about purposes and their role in making self-determining choices within the context of the project" (pp. 164, 170). Moreover, she notes that there is potential for a more subtle and potentially conflicted vision of "empowerment" and dialogue within critical theory that the college students did not take advantage of. Herter is quite conscious, however, of the conundrums and limitations involved in engaging an effort to create a more fully dialogic space. In fact, different ideas of fair "deliberation" have been shown by recent scholars to inherently contain with them cultured and class assumptions about the nature of dialogue (Delpit, 1995; Sanders, 1997; Young, 1997). Further, as I have noted, from many "postmodern" perspectives attempts to "communicate" with others are always conflicted, riven with power, and, ultimately impossible in any absolute sense. In fact, from Popkewitz's perspective it can become difficult to distinguish ethically between the project as Herter (1998) describes it, which, because the high school students were conscious of being dominated, actually seems to have *generated* resistance and in some cases an "appropriation of the college students' agenda" (p. 165), and a more apparently "dialogic" or "democratic" dialogue that might more effectively *co-opt* and/or short-circuit such overt resistance. Despite these and other dilemmas, however, much like Herter, the scholars I have discussed still aim towards a vision of democracy that never arrives, can never be fully described, and is always already problematic and conflicted.

From the different perspectives presented in this paper, a myriad of different kinds of struggles for "freedom" can be discerned in Herter's example. Laclau and Mouffe might point to, and seek to tease out, the potentials resident in the tenuous collective definitions of the two groups through opposition to each other, overlaid by a common identification of all of the members of the theater project as a group in opposition to multiple aspects of the world outside, as well as intersecting oppositional constructions of race, gender, and more. Arendt might emphasize the possibilities and limitations involved in helping participants coalesce themselves into distinctive perspectives on a shared project. Noddings would probably focus on the potential resident in the unique relationships different group members established and might establish with each other, seeking ways to foster these. Rorty might press the students to escape from any limiting definitions of the nature of aesthetic activity, encouraging

individual self-construction at the same time as he sought ways to isolate these "private" constructions from the necessarily more banal "public" aspects of the group's project. And certainly there are aspects of Boal's and Freire's vision that could be appropriated in a more postmodern manner, as I have done with Noddings, for example. Each of these approaches would reveal possibilities and challenges while failing to fully capture the lived richness of the theater project. Each would present different and contradictory avenues for the development of strategies for nurturing individual and collective "freedom." Further, as I noted above, these perspectives represent not only a limited sample of possible "postmodern" perspectives, but a small fraction of the myriad ways in which scholars in many different/overlapping "traditions," from Marxism to feminism to critical race theory, and more, have framed challenges to and understandings of freedom and oppression.

In the end, one can expect from the land of abstraction only questions and illuminations, not answers. Thinking we know the truth about freedom destroys freedom.[23] To be postmodern is to live with such tensions. We must appropriate theories (sometimes rejecting them, always deforming them, reconstructing them) *with* our students in the contingent circumstances of our lives, never quite certain, as Herter (1998) notes,[24] what "collaboration" itself will entail. We must believe in a democracy "to come" while maintaining democracy as best we can in the now, without any clear "banisters" (Arendt, 1978) to hold onto, without even something as vague as a "guiding ideal" (Laclau, 1996) to permanently point the way for us into tomorrow (even though we will always have provisional ideals in the now). We cannot escape the admixtures of empowerment and oppression, the precarious balancings of possibilities and limitations, that are inescapably involved in efforts to teach. To be democratic, to teach freedom, would seem to require that we constantly enter, as Spivak (1994) notes, "the risky night of non-knowledge." (p. 26).

Notes

[1] For more on these issues see Harvey (1989) and Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996). Michael Apple presents one especially effective version of how we might bring the different strands of what I would call postmodernism together in his recent work (while adding in critical theory) (see, e.g., Apple 1993; 1995, pp. vii-xxii; Cho and Apple, 1998). There is quite a lot of argument about how "new" all this is, or, what is "new" and what isn't, as well as questions about who is really affected by the "new" parts in the U.S. or the world.

[2] Quayson (2000) and Collins (1998), among others, argue that many "themes" of postmodernism, in this sense, were "prefigured" by the experiences of those who have been marginal in the (post)modern world, although Collins (1998) argues that scholars positioned with more privilege have "stripped" these of their "initial oppositional intent" (p. 127). I have begun to extend on aspects of this critique myself elsewhere (Schutz, 2001). Here, however, I focus on the oppositional possibilities of some of the kinds of theory Collins critiques (although, see my comments on structure, below).

[3] Of course, a willingness to be *too* flexible may lead us to lose gains we have achieved, potentially leading us to give up aspects of ourselves. A pluralistic "strategic" approach does not require us to separate means from ends; the transformation of a particular theoretical perspective into a practical strategy is itself

a kind of "end," requiring the taking on of particular kinds of identity, the appropriation of particular ways of being [Dewey, 1916].)

⁴ I do not explore subtle differences between Laclau and Mouffe's visions.

⁵ Of course, it is difficult (and from a postmodern perspective, ultimately impossible) to draw strict boundaries between these different discourses. Postcolonial and critical race theory, for example, are often informed to some extent by (and/or extends) on postmodern/poststructural perspectives (see Quayson, 2000; Jinks, 1997).

⁶ Spivak is also pointing out here that some of our ways of being are (or seem) simply unavoidable, leaving us critiquing "things without which we cannot live on, take chances; like our self-identikit" (p. 4).

⁷ He is speaking, here, in the context of his idea of "iterability."

⁸ Seyla Benhabib (1996) argues that Arendt is a "reluctant modernist." Certainly this is a defensible position. Elsewhere, however (in Schutz [in press b]) I argue that there are actually a range of conflicting currents in Arendt.

⁹ Thus, it is important to note that I draw from the more poststructural aspects of Spivak's work.

¹⁰ Butler (1993) notes that "one writes into a field of writing that is invariably and promisingly larger and less masterable than the one over which one maintains a provisional authority, and . . . the unanticipated reappropriations of a given work in areas for which it was never consciously intended are some of the most useful" (p. 19).

¹¹ While Popkewitz (1998a) notes that he can problematize "the hailing of diversity, flexibility, and contingency as norms for interpreting social life and educational reforms" "without necessarily forgoing social principles" (p. 27) it is difficult to see how one would formulate particular strategies for action from within his vision.

¹² See also Richard King's (1996) book on the visions of freedom that informed the Civil Rights Movement

¹³ Elsewhere he notes that "the actor is paradoxically reintroduced, but not by looking for the agent in the narrative of inquiry. The agent is introduced through destabilizing the conditions which confine and intern consciousness and its principles of order" (Popkewitz, 1997b, p. 139). Note that this includes a rejection of *coherent* actors in the name of the actor, however. Also, note the use of passive voice in this and other of Popkewitz's discussion of actors and agents. Perhaps they "are" reintroduced, but there *is* (can be, in this vision) no *one* who does the reintroducing.

¹⁴ It is important to note that there are other conceptualizations of the "outside" of a particular discourse within what I am calling postmodern theory. Butler (1993) argues, for example, that because any social practice circumscribes possible options for individuals within that practice, the "injunction" to remain within the realm of what is intelligible to other participants "requires and institutes a 'constitutive outside'—the unspeakable, the unviable, the nonnarrativizable that secures and, hence, fails to secure, the very borders of materiality" (p. 188). Unlike MacIntyre's clash of discourses, this "constuitive outside" continually subverts the coherence of the discourse that attempts and yet must fail to exclude it as an option for itself, while the "outside" cannot entirely constitute itself. Because this vision resembles aspects of Laclau and Mouffe's perspective, discussed below (also see, e.g., Butler & Laclau, 1997) I do not engage directly with it.

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion of Noddings's caring and its limitations, see Schutz (1998).

[16] In fact, in a recent presentation at the Philosophy of Education Society Convention, New Orleans, March, 1999, Noddings noted that she no longer thinks that the urge to "care" is natural. Instead, she now appears to think that what is natural is the desire to be cared *for*. From a postmodern perspective, even such a minimal vision of universality is problematic, unless the meaning of "care" becomes so vague as to take on little or no concrete meaning in terms of an actual social practice.

[17] For a more detailed discussion of Arendt's model of the public, see Schutz (1999a; in press a).

[18] Although the public and caring represent fundamentally different practices, they can also be mutually supportive. Nonetheless, Arendt seemed clear that public collaboration was possible even in the absence of pre-established caring relations.

[19] For more discussion of this example, see Schutz and Moss (2000).

[20] While Rorty, for example, argues for his public/private solution, he does acknowledge that there are others. Arendt's vision is quite conflicted (see Schutz [in press b]). And, as I have already noted, Popkewitz explicitly acknowledges the need to develop other approaches to supplement his own.

[21] While Arendt argued that such boundaries between the public and the rest of the world *should* be created, they are not inherently required by her model. Noddings's carer is located in circles of caring that limit her dispersion.

[22] To some extent all efforts like this are informed by theory, but they are also always already informed as well by the transparent assumptions and practices of the teacher(s), which is certainly true of the college students in this case study. It may seem odd to end a paper on postmodernism by referring to what is usually seen as much more "foundational" theory. However, although there have been efforts to envision how postmodernism might inform teaching (e.g., Gore, 1993; Lather, 1991; Ellsworth, 1997) it is from the perspective of critical theory that one is more likely to attempt more direct efforts to "teach freedom." Thus, this example is extremely relevant to the question I raised in the beginning about how postmodernism might (and might not) more directly inform efforts to "empower" students, as it were.

[23] Of course, paradoxically, attempts to represent the "true" nature of freedom and social struggle often represent strategies themselves.

[24] Herter (1998) notes that "collaboration requires constant rebuilding and ongoing revision if it is to fulfill goals of social change" (p. 173).

Acknowledgements

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